1

It had been quite a while since I had been caught up in the whirlwind of a stormy Sugar Creek adventure. It began to look as if I might have to live through the rest of the summer without anything worrisome happening to me. And as almost any boy knows, one of the worst things that can happen to a boy is to have nothing happen to him.

Also, as almost any boy knows, there are two kinds of adventures a boy can have around Sugar Creek. One is the hair-raising kind that whams into him the way a whirlwind surprises a pile of autumn leaves. It picks him up and tosses him into the middle of a problem or a mystery or a menace. It stirs up the boy to use his mind and muscles to help himself or somebody else out of whatever trouble he or somebody else is in.

The other kind of adventure is what my bushy-eyebrowed, reddish brown mustached farmer father calls the "educational" type. "It's the best kind," he has told me maybe seventy-three times, "and it will do a boy a lot more good in the long run." My grayish brown haired mother calls it an "adventure of the mind."

But what boy wants a lot of good done to

him? I'll have to admit that I would rather have the hair-raising, spine-tingling kind of adventure such as the gang has had quite a few of in the past several years.

Maybe you've already heard about how we killed a fierce, mad old mother bear and a sheep-stealing wildcat; how we licked the afternoon daylights out of a tough town gang in the Battle of Bumblebee Hill; and all the nervous excitement we had when we tried to act out a poem every boy knows, taking a wet pet lamb to school one day. We certainly found out that *that* was against the rule, and it more than certainly didn't make everybody laugh and play—especially not the teacher. We've even ridden the world's longest chairlift, at Aspen, Colorado.

But it began to look as if the rest of our summer vacation from school would be a very ordinary one, full of ordinary things such as mowing our own lawns for nothing, working in our own gardens for nothing, and washing and drying dishes for nothing. One of my worst chores was to baby-sit my little sister for nothing. She was three years old and couldn't be baby-sat anyway, because she never sat still long enough for anybody to sit with her.

And I should explain that when my parents talked about educational adventures, they didn't mean reading and writing and arithmetic.

"All of life is a schoolroom," my father explained to me. "You can have an adventure in your mind every day, even while you are drying dishes or hoeing potatoes or weeding the

black-seeded Simpson lettuce in the garden. Even while you're—"

Dad hesitated a few seconds, and while his sentence was still in midair, I cut in to suggest, "Or while I'm sitting on a log down at the mouth of the branch, with my line out in the water waiting for a bass to strike?"

My father's eyebrows dropped at my joke. Then he said something very educational and which, before you get through reading this story, you probably will decide is maybe one of the most important things in the world for a boy or even a girl to know.

"Son," my dad's deep voice growled out to me, "everything good or bad a boy ever does starts in his mind, not in his muscles."

"Not even in his powerful biceps?" I asked, trying hard to say something humorous.

Because we were standing halfway between the iron pitcher pump and the grape arbor with its empty two-by-four crossbeam, six feet high, challenging me to leap up and skin the cat on it, I felt my biceps ordering me to give them a little exercise. Quick as anything, I whirled, leaped for the crossbeam, caught it, and chinned myself three times. Then, quick as scat, I skinned the cat, swung my legs up and over, and in less time than it takes to write these few words, I was sitting up there and grinning down at Dad, feeling wonderful that my powerful biceps and my other muscles had done exactly what they had wanted to do.

"This adventure started in my muscles," I said down to him.

Dad lowered his eyebrows at me again and said, "Wrong! Your muscles didn't do that. *You* did. Your mind wanted you to do it, and you yourself—the you that is on the inside of you—ordered your muscles to do it, and they obeyed you."

Still trying to be funny, I answered, "I'm glad you admit I have a mind." I looked out across the treetops of our orchard toward the west, where Poetry, my almost-best friend, lived. I flexed my biceps and felt one of the most wonderful feelings a boy ever feels, as I filled my lungs with clean, seven-o'clock-in-the-morning fresh air. Then, like our old red rooster, I flapped my arms, lifted my face toward the sky, and let out a squawking, high-pitched *"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"*

"That," I said to Dad, with a grin in my natural voice, "was an adventure of the voice."

He shrugged and made it easy for me to come down by ordering me to. "There's something I want to show you before breakfast," he said.

He led the way from where we were to the row of flaming hollyhocks that grew along the orchard fence just west of the grape arbor—which was about thirty-seven feet from the west side of our house. There we stopped, both of us listening in the direction of the kitchen door to hear a woman's voice calling to us that breakfast was ready.

"Look," Dad began. He lifted a hollyhock leaf very carefully, the way he does Charlotte Ann's little chin when he wants to see into her mischievous blue eyes. Charlotte Ann is the very cute little sister I've already mentioned—my "first and worst," as Poetry describes her.

I focused my eyes on the large, coarse, round hollyhock leaf resting on Dad's forefinger. I was also looking at several big, circular, wide-open maroon flowers of which there were maybe thirteen on the tall hollyhock stalk.

"What am I supposed to see?" I said to Dad, yawning.

He answered, "Dew! Fresh, clean dewdrops. See how damp this leaf is?"

When I answered, "What about it?" I was surprised at what he said next.

"Notice that this leaf is as wet on the inferior side as on the superior." He probably thought I was old enough to learn the meaning of those two long words.

Then Dad went leaping and diving into the educational adventure he wanted me to enjoy with him. He was kind of like a boy already out in the middle of Sugar Creek calling back to another boy, "Come on in! The water's fine!"

"The hollyhock," Dad's deep voice rumbled, "is a Chinese herb, a garden plant of the mallow family. In Egypt its leaves are used for food—after they're cooked, of course. The hollyhock's botanical name is the *Althea rosea,* and, like most flowers, it is symbolic."

Most of Dad's words were too long for me

to understand, and it seemed this wasn't going to be a very interesting adventure of the mind. It didn't have enough action in it—nothing to use my muscles on. I started to say so but yawned again instead and squinted at the hollyhock leaf. I was surprised to notice it *did* have as much dew on the underside as it did on its top.

"Furthermore," Dad went on, "the symbolism of the hollyhock is *ambition*. And that's the first half of today's educational adventure."

I had my eye on the hollyhock stalk right next to the one Dad was using as his object lesson. "*What's* the first half of my adventure?" I asked. My mind was in the kitchen where frying country sausage was sending its fragrance all the way out to our outdoor schoolroom.

"Ambition," Dad answered in a teacherlike voice. "Every time you see a hollyhock anywhere, you're supposed to say to yourself, 'Bill Collins, don't be a lazy good-for-nothing! Be ambitious! Wake up your mind and put it to work to be somebody worthwhile in life. Don't be a drone lying around a hive!' Does that make sense to you?"

"Does what make sense?" I asked, but I thought I knew what he meant. He expected me to be a hollyhock kind of boy—not an idler or a worthless, shiftless, lazy good-for-nothing, as he had just said.

Well, Dad and Mom and I were pretty good friends. All three of us laughed with each other at different things that happened around the place or at things one or the other had read or

heard somewhere. We would sometimes have a joke between us for a whole day. So, even though I was sort of sleepy and also hungry, I looked up at the grin under Dad's mustache and asked, "Are you sure you're interested in my being an ambitious boy, or are you thinking about the garden out there, hoping somebody's only son will show a little more interest in it?"

"The garden, of course," was Dad's good-natured answer. Then he added, "Ambition in a boy's mind can do a better job controlling his muscles than three beech switches hanging on the gun rack in the toolshed."

My mind's eye looked right through the ponderosa pine wall of the toolshed and saw Dad's gun rack with two shotguns and my .22 rifle on it. I also saw, lying across the lower horns of the rack, three innocent-looking beech switches, and I remembered how Dad had once remarked to Poetry's father, "The guns are for wild animals, and the switches are for wild boys."

Right then Mom called from the kitchen door that breakfast was ready. It probably would be pancakes and sausage, milk, and maybe some kind of fresh fruit, such as yesterday's just picked cherries, which I'd picked myself from the tree that grew not more than twenty feet from the hollyhocks' last tall, spire-like stalk.

"One minute," Dad called to Mom. "I have to assign tomorrow's lesson!"

Dad assigned it to me quickly, seeming to be in more of a hurry than before Mom had called. I took my small notebook out of my shirt pocket and wrote down what he told me.

On the way back to the board walk that led to our kitchen's back door, I was thinking about Dad's assignment, which was "Look up page 204 in *The Greem Treasury* in our upstairs library and study it. Also look up the word *dew* in our unabridged *Webster*. Then read William Cullen Bryant's poem 'To a Waterfowl.'"

Tomorrow I was to tell my teacher-father what, if any, new ideas had come to me.

Before going into the house to pancakes, sausage, fruit, and whatever else Mom would have ready, Dad and I stopped for a minute at the low, round-topped table near the iron pitcher pump, where there was a washbasin, a bar of soap, and a towel. There I washed my already clean face and hands.

That was one of the rules at our house. A certain red-haired, freckle-faced boy I knew got to wash his face and hands before he was allowed to sit at the table three times a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year. Say, did you ever figure up how many times you've had to do that since you were old enough to be told? Even in one year, it'd be over a thousand times!

"You first," I said to my father, since he was the oldest and was more used to cold water than I was.

While Dad was washing his hands and face,

I studied the leaves of Mom's row of salvia growing at the other end of her horseradish bed. When I lifted the chin of one of the green leaves, what to my wondering eyes should appear on the underside of the leaf but as much dew as there was on top!

Later, while I was sitting at the table with Dad and Mom— Charlotte Ann was still asleep in her little bed in the front bedroom—I said to Dad, "I'm already ready for tomorrow's lesson. William Cullen Bryant was wrong when he wrote 'Whither, midst falling dew . . .'"

I knew that those four words were the first line of Bryant's "To a Waterfowl." I'd memorized it in school.

"Dew," I said to Dad around a bite of pancake, "doesn't do what he said it did."

Mom, not knowing what on earth—or under a hollyhock or salvia leaf—Dad and I were talking about, looked at me across the table and asked, "What kind of talk is that—'Do doesn't do what he said it did'?"

Our senses of humor came to life, and for a few seconds Dad and I had a good laugh at Mom's expense. Dad asked her, "How do you spell do, my dear? Do you spell dew *do* or do you spell do *dew?*"

Mom's face was a blank, except for the question marks and exclamation points on it. Her kind of pretty eyebrows went down, and a nervous little crinkle ran up and down her forehead.

Dad explained what he and I meant, but

for some reason, *her* sense of humor didn't come to life. So we changed the subject and went on eating our sausage and pancakes and cherries.

Because I was a boy with a boy's mind, having more important things on it than dew, which didn't fall at all but condensed instead, I felt the outdoors calling me to come and enjoy it.

There was, for instance, a little brown path—made by boys' bare feet—that ran as crooked as a cow path through the woods to the spring. It began on the other side of the rail fence on the far side of the road and twisted and dodged along, round and round, till it came to a hill that led down to the Black Widow Stump and on to the leaning linden tree.

Beginning at the linden tree, another path scooted east along a high rail fence to a wild crab apple tree and on to the place where the gang squeezed through the fence to get to the bayou.

Still another path ran from the leaning linden tree down a steep incline to the spring. From the spring, after you eased through a barbed wire fence, a cool path ran between the bayou and the creek, through tall marsh grass and all kinds of weeds to a clearing that bordered Dragonfly's father's cornfield. It ended at a well-worn grassy place under the Snatzerpazooka tree, where we had some of our most important meetings and where we left our clothes when we went in swimming.

That very place was the place where, at two o'clock that afternoon, the gang was supposed to meet—all of us that could. We were to discuss plans to spend tomorrow night at Old Man Paddler's cabin far up in the hills, beyond the cave and the sycamore tree and on the other side of the swamp.

All the whole wonderful Sugar Creek playground was sort of in my mind while I was at the breakfast table that morning—the morning of the beginning of the story of the Battle of the Bees.

In a sad corner of my mind, though, was something else—a garden begging a boy my size (with or without ambition) to come and do something about the small weeds, which, since the last rain, were growing twice as fast as the black-seeded Simpson lettuce, the Ebenezer onions, and the Golden Bantam sweet corn.

In the educational section of my mind was a row of hollyhocks with maybe a hundred many-colored flowers in full bloom. All the flowers seemed to have voices calling me to get out into the garden as soon as I could. "Ambition, Bill Collins! Ambition! Don't be an idle good-for-nothing! Don't be a drone lazying around at the door of a beehive!"

I'd seen hundreds of dopey drones lying around the beehives in Dad's apiary. While the worker bees were as busy as bees flying in and out, gathering honey and helping pollinate the clover in Harm Groenwald's field on the other

side of the lane, those lazy, good-for-nothing drones did nothing at all.

Sitting at the breakfast table that morning, I didn't have the slightest idea that bees and beehives, Charlotte Ann, and a home run I was going to knock that afternoon were going to give me an exciting adventure of mind and muscle such as I'd never had before in all my half-long life.

2

You would hardly imagine that an ordinary breakfast at our house would be so important to a boy, but it was. You can see how important the ordinary things we said and thought were, and how they got mixed up in this story, if you will imagine yourself to be a ghost somewhere up in the air above our table, watching and listening. Keep your ghost eyes and ears open now, so you won't miss anything.

First, you see Mom in her chair between the range and the table where we are having breakfast. She is stirring her coffee. Dad is wiping his reddish brown mustache with his napkin. And across the table the long way from him is a red-haired, freckle-faced boy named Bill. The boy's plate is empty, and his silverware is lying across it the way you are supposed to place it when you have good manners.

Between Mom and Dad, you can see my sister Charlotte Ann's empty high chair. Lying on the chair's large wooden tray is a very old, gray, clothbound book open near the middle.

Out of that book, for several weeks now, our family had been taking turns reading, getting thoughts and ideas for what we call "garden time," which some families call "family devotions."

"It's the time we cultivate our hearts' gardens" was Mom's way of explaining it.

Sometimes our garden times were interrupted by Charlotte Ann waking up or being already awake and at the table with us and not behaving herself. Sometimes our thoughts would be exploded like a punctured soap bubble by the phone ringing two long longs and a very short short, and it would be some Sugar Creek Gang mother wanting to talk or listen to my mother about different things mothers like to talk about and listen to. Sometimes we were interrupted by a noise out at the barn, such as Old Red Addie and her pigs squealing for their breakfast.

Once in a while there might be a boy at our front gate near the walnut tree, or he might get all the way to our iron pitcher pump and be pumping away, getting himself a drink before I'd see or hear him.

Our garden time never lasted very long—just long enough for us to find a live seed to plant or a weed to pull out, which was Mom's way of saying it. Also, we were supposed to get a new thought of some kind and think about it every now and then during the day.

"Clean thoughts," Dad had said quite a few times, "help keep a boy's mind clean."

Well, as soon as garden time at our breakfast table was over that morning—as you would have known if you'd been a ghost there and watching—you'd have seen three people with their heads bowed and their eyes closed and

heard one of us making a short prayer. Then you'd have heard me excuse myself and seen me go outdoors to the toolshed to get the one-wheeled cultivator, push it out into our garden, and go to work.

While I was still in the toolshed, I stood for a few seconds looking at Dad's two shotguns on the gun rack and at my .22. Just below it were the three beech switches he hardly ever used anymore. They might just as well be broken into pieces and burned.

It seemed for a second or six that my .22 was talking to me, saying, "You'd better take me with you Friday night. Remember the fierce old, mad old mother bear the gang stumbled onto a few summers ago? If Big Jim hadn't had his gun along, Little Jim might have been killed. Remember the fierce-fanged wildcat you killed? Who knows what you might need me for up in the hills away from everybody in the middle of the night?"

In my mind I could sort of hear the three beech switches talking, too, and saying, "Ambition, Bill Collins!" It was the same thing the hollyhocks out along the fence were supposed to be saying.

In a little while I was all the way out to the garden, pushing the hand plow back and forth between the rows of black-seeded Simpson lettuce, the Ebenezer onions, and the Golden Bantam sweet corn. In my mind as I worked, my .22 was still talking and warning me of some danger we might run into Friday night.

But danger was something I wouldn't dare mention to my parents—especially not to my mother. She would worry about me, since mothers are made that way and can't help it.

In my mind were also two words we had found in the gray book that morning. Mom had liked those two words so well she'd said them over and over again. She'd even said them several times sort of half to herself, while standing at the stove with her back to us and pouring herself another cup of coffee. Those two words, if you didn't happen to hear them, were "slumbering splendor."

The sentence the words were in, and which Dad had read to us, went something like this, "There may be any amount of slumbering splendor in us, but it cannot get out because of sin."

"It's just like a lily bulb," Mom had thought to say. Her spoon, stirring the sugar and cream in her cup, squeaked a little as she talked.

"Inside the dry-looking, sometimes ugly bulb, there is a beautiful lily, snow-white and fragrant. But as long as it's asleep in the bulb, wrapped round and round with layer after layer of its self life, it cannot get out." She had a far-away look in her eyes as she said it, as if she was seeing something wonderful for the first time.

I could tell that Mom and Dad were getting more out of what they were talking about than I was, but it did seem pretty wonderful that a dried-up old lily bulb or tulip bulb could grow out of itself and become something different.

"In other words," Dad looked at me to say,

"when you look at anything, you're supposed to see more than you see. When your two gray green eyes see a tulip bulb lying in a box with a dozen others, your inner eye sees the future—a border of tulips somewhere with a dozen two-foot-tall tulip stalks, each one holding up a blue or yellow or red or white or purple cup, all the cups empty and trying to catch as much rain and sunshine as they can hold."

Mom cut in then to say, "Isn't that pretty flowery language?"

Dad's friendly answer was, "We're talking about pretty flowers, aren't we?"

Right then, our garden time was stopped by a familiar sound coming from the front bedroom —the way a cat sounds when you accidentally step on its tail or like the "six little pigs in the straw with their mother, with bright eyes, curly tails, tumbling on each other" and squealing for their breakfast. It was Charlotte Ann coming out of the night into the day.

Back and forth, forth and back, push, grunt, walk, push, grunt, sweat—my cultivator crawled back and forth across the garden, while all the time I was straining my inner eye to see if I could see more than I saw.

If there was a lot of sleeping splendor in every boy, it was also maybe in everything a boy looked at. Also, the boy might even try to wake up a little of it.

Right then, I spied our old black-and-white cat sleeping in the sun on the sloping cellar

door, not far from the iron pitcher pump. I stooped, picked up a clod of dirt, and slung it across the yard, where it landed with a noisy thud less than twelve inches from Mixy's early morning nap.

Talk about sleeping splendor waking up! Mixy came to the fastest cat life a cat ever came to. She leaped into the air and took off like a streak toward Mom's flowerpot table beside the toolshed.

Right that second I heard a fluttering of wings. A robin with an orange breast had landed *ker-plop* a few feet behind me and started helping herself to a wriggling worm my hand plow had just unearthed.

My cultivator had wakened a sleeping fishworm. When I saw it, I saw more than I saw. In a few fast flashes of my inner eye, I saw it wriggling on a boy's hook far down in the water in the fishing hole near the mouth of the branch of the creek. I saw a monster sunfish make a dive for it and even saw seven fish on a stringer.

But the mother robin, seeing the worm, had seen five baby robins in the nest in the plum tree with five hungry mouths wide open and cheeping for food.

It was sort of a game I was playing. A little later I came to and found I had plowed my way back and forth across the garden thirteen or fourteen times without knowing it. And it hadn't even seemed like work.

I hadn't even heard Dad coming—didn't know he was there until suddenly I saw him

standing like a fence post at the end of the garden gate, watching me.

"Good work, son!" he called to me, and his gruff voice was like music. There is probably nothing a boy would like to hear more than one of his parents praising him for something.

"My sleeping splendor," I called jokingly from where I was stooping over to pull a small smartweed from an Ebenezer onion, "has just come to life!"

Then with Dad's compliment pushing me like a breeze blowing a cloud of dust, I grabbed the cultivator handles and went swooshing down the row to the other end. My shovel was turning up fishworms, the larvae of June beetles, and a lot of other underground insect life that lived in our garden.

Dad waited till I came panting back before he said anything else. Then in a very fatherly voice he announced, "Your mother and I have to run into town after lunch. I need another quart of paint for the toolshed, and we have to have a screen for the front bedroom window. It's just too hot these summer days with the window shut, and the flies and mosquitoes get in when it's open. And your mother wants to get the groceries while the sales are on. You know how Charlotte Ann is in the supermarket, so we're leaving her here with you. You won't mind baby-sitting her?"

His voice had a question mark on the end of his sentence, but I knew it was an order. I, Bill Collins, who had planned to meet with the

gang at two o'clock to go in swimming and to help make plans for Friday's all-night in Old Man Paddler's cabin, was going to have to baby-sit a baby that couldn't be baby-sat with!

Suddenly something inside of me woke up, and it wasn't anything that could be spelled s-p-l-e-n-d-o-r! Out of my mouth like a baseball off a fast bat there flew a sizzling exclamation. "Baby-sit! That's not fair, when the gang is meeting at the Snatzerpazooka tree at two o'clock!"

It was the stormiest temper explosion I'd had in a long time, and it had happened just when I'd been feeling better inside than for a long time.

Now any boy knows that a sentence full of hot words coming out of his mouth at his father is like poking a stick into a bumblebees' nest—the bumblebees' nest being the boy's father. And that boy is likely to get stung several fast, sharp times with a beech switch.

There isn't a boy in the whole Sugar Creek territory that would know that any better than Theodore Collins's son. But my temper had picked me up and tossed me around in the air as though I was a last year's leaf in a whirlwind.

My hands were gripping the cultivator handles. When I looked down at them, the knuckles were white. My teeth were set, and my jaw muscles were in a knot.

And then something very strange happened —something I decided afterward was maybe one of the most wonderful things that can happen to a boy. As fast as lightning there flashed

into my mind one of the Ten Commandments we had studied in Sunday school the week before. "Honor your father and your mother!" were the words that came to me, burning my temper into nothing.

I felt as weak as a sick cat and ashamed of myself. And what did my wondering ears hear but my own voice saying to Dad, "There's a lot of sleeping splendor in a baby sister. Tell Mom I'll be glad to stay with her, but I'll have to call the gang and explain why I can't come to the meeting."

Dad stared at me. His mouth was open to say something else, but not even one word came out. Instead there were actual honest-to-goodness tears in his eyes, and I saw him swallow as if he had a lump in his throat.

For maybe a full thirty seconds, we just stared at each other. Then he spoke in a husky voice, saying, "God bless you, Son. God bless you!"

He turned away slowly, stooped, picked up a clod of dirt, and broke it apart. And do you know what? There was a middle-sized fishworm in it. Before you could have said Jack Robinson, he stooped again, picked up an empty tin can lying by the gate, sifted a handful of dirt into it, dropped the worm in on top of the dirt, and said, "You might watch while you're working. Save all the worms you turn up. You'll probably want to go fishing again before long."

I watched my father's broad back as he strode toward the house. I could hardly see

him because of the mist in my eyes, and it seemed that in all my life I had never liked my big-voiced, hard-muscled, callous-handed father as much as I did right that second. And I was feeling as clean inside as a cottontail dashing through the snow in our south pasture.

At the iron pitcher pump, Dad stopped, gave the handle a few fast squeaking strokes, took a drink, and tossed what water was left in the cup over the top of the water tank and into a puddle. In a second, about fifteen white and yellow butterflies fluttered in every direction of up there is—that's another happy sight a boy sees around our farm.

I said something to myself then, not knowing I was going to say it, and it was, "Sleeping splendor! It's everywhere, if you look for it. Even in a father."

I was whistling "Yankee Doodle" and slicing away at the sandy loam of the garden when, from as far away as I was, I heard the phone ring in the house, and it was our number—two long longs and a very short short. A jiffy later Mom's voice came quavering out to the garden where I was, calling, "Bill! Telephone!"

And away I went *lickety-sizzle* for the house, wondering who would be calling me and why. My feet were wings, and my heart was like a feather in the wind as I ran.